The digital Luther

by [Mark U. Edwards](#) in the [March 15, 2000](#) issue

Martin Luther: Exploring His Life and Times, 1483-1546, by Helmar Jughans (CD-ROM)

Written biographies of Martin Luther abound, but only one multimedia, hypertext CD-ROM attempts the tale. As a Luther scholar and sometime software designer, I find this production's media more interesting than its message.

Good software shouldn't need a manual, so I simply pop the CD into the drive and begin. First problem: the disk boots to the Windows Explorer and a read-me file advises me to load a font and change my screen to 640x480 and 256 colors. Easy for me to do, but for others? I decide to add the font but leave the screen at its normal 1024x768 and high-color resolution. It works.

The main menu screen shows a pastel dart-board-like arrangement with eight wedge-shaped segments, three rings and a central rondelle "bulls-eye." As I move the mouse pointer around, the shape changes, music plays, choices are highlighted, and topical illustrations appear in the rondelle. At the bottom left corner an ornate letter labels each highlighted ring: "C" for "Chapter," "F" for "Film," "T" for "Theme." There are eight choices in the outer ring, each linking to a chapter of hypertext--for example, "Childhood and Education," or "Monk, Journey to Rome, Professor of Theology, 1505-1518."

The middle ring links to animated clips covering each chapter, and the inner links to eight themes--toys, travels, purgatory, printing, angels, reading, alchemy, and life and death. Finally, revolving over the middle ring are eight stylized icons. When I finally catch one with my mouse, the less-than-helpful word "rubric" appears in the bottom-left corner. It turns out that there are eight groups of lexically arranged supplementary materials, each associated with a different icon: Biographies, Legacy (monuments and later illustrations), Pictures, Music (text, scores and audio), Text (often a quote from Luther), Chronology, Glossary and Places. The main menu also allows the user to turn off the background music--a blessing after 20 minutes of repetitive tunes--and to get help.

After clicking around a bit I find the interface easy to use and intuitive. Diving into the films, I am greatly impressed by the way the animators employ computer graphic techniques to turn 16th-century woodcuts, paintings and maps into motion pictures. Various Lucas Cranach Luthers, for example, nod yes and no, smile and grimace, walk about and make hand gestures. Popes shake their fists and glare. Sixteenth-century cityscapes become three-dimensional. Horses trot, armies move and windows open and close to change scenes. Occasionally, the animators add humor. King Henry VIII uses seven fingers on one hand to enumerate the seven sacraments, and a giant roller-brush helps Katie Luther paint the Luther house. Less humorous and even a bit disturbing are animated caricatures of some of Luther's opponents. For example, John of Leyden, the Anabaptist "king" of Münster, is literally demonized.

In working through the text chapters I quickly discover that this is a mouse-only program. The direction keys do nothing and the ESC key throws me back to the operating system. Fortunately, the mouse pointer changes as it moves around the screen to help the user know what to do next. For example, the pointer becomes an appropriate rubric icon over highlighted words, although, surprisingly, a click does not bring up the associated supplementary material but instead deposits a labeled bookmark on the screen. To actually view the link, you have to click on the bookmark. When the screen becomes cluttered with bookmarks, I have to experiment to determine how to delete the used ones. (As in so much else in this interface, keep your eye on the mouse pointer: when it changes to an "x" over the bookmark's label, a click will delete the mark.)

The hypertext in this CD-ROM is not very hyper. The rubrics or supplementary materials contain almost no links among themselves, and there is no cross-reference link in the text. In essence, the supplementary materials serve much like beautiful and useful sidebars to a standard linear text. But they are truly multiple and rich, with marvelous reproductions of 16th-century paintings, woodcuts and title pages; hymn texts that are both displayed and sung in German with English text translations; reliable although brief biographical and glossary entries; useful pictures of places and maps; and well-chosen primary materials in English translation, both text and audio.

Turning to the eight themes, I find them amusing if not particularly deep. For example, the theme "toys" reveals a child plucking cherries from a cherry tree. When I move the mouse around, cherries are illuminated, the child's eyebrows go up

and down, and one berry disappears. If I click on an illuminated cherry, a 16th-century picture of a toy appears and a verse from a nursery rhyme is spoken. Each theme takes different forms and is fun to play with--at least once or twice.

As one would expect from a world-renowned Luther scholar, Helmar Junghans provides a reliable account of Luther's biography. He implicitly seems to favor an early dating for Luther's Reformation "breakthrough." In the rubrics he acknowledges the contested status of the nailing of the 95 Theses and Luther's "Here I stand" declaration at the Diet of Worms. Except for Luther's late anti-Jewish writings, the more nasty polemics receive short shrift--or is it few bytes? In general, this CD-ROM biography is more hagiographic than seems appropriate in this ecumenical age and could stand to be supplemented by more balanced accounts.

Will CD-ROMs replace books anytime soon? I don't think so, but the rich multimedia content of CD-ROMs such as this can add a welcome dimension to linear narrative.